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Water rate hike is linked to dramatic drop in use

Smaller households, conservation cited

MARK GILLISPIE
Plain Dealer Reporter

Despite some growth in the number of customers the last 30 years, the Cleveland Water Department has seen a dramatic drop in water use. And that drop is a big reason why the department wants a rate hike.

Figures provided by the department show that residential water

use has fallen 42 percent — from around 98,000 gallons per household in 1980 to about 57,000 gallons last year. Consumption has fallen 20 percent in the last six years alone.

Department officials declined to be interviewed for this story, but other experts suggest that the drop in water consumption in Northeast Ohio reflects a national trend brought on by smaller households and increased conservation.

And while water conservation might be good for the environment, it has not helped the department's

bottom line. The drop in consumption is the primary reason the Water Department wants to increase rates 82 percent for typical Cleveland residential customers and about 50 percent for suburbanites over 4½ years.

The department directly bills about 414,000 residential and commercial accounts in 65 Northeast Ohio communities and provides water to 1.5 million people.

A study released last year by the Water Research Foundation, an international nonprofit organization, estimated, that residential use na-

tionally had dropped more than 13 percent between 1978 and 2008.

Researchers said the likely reasons for the drop in consumption are shrinking households and increased efficiency of toilets, faucets, shower heads, washing machines and dishwashers.

Toilets account for 30 percent of indoor water use by homeowners, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, topping all other sources of residential water consumption.

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The EPA reports that replacing old toilets with high-efficiency models can save a homeowner 4,000 gallons of water a year.

Bill Maddaus of Maddaus Water Management in Alamo, Calif., said the economic downturn the last several years has probably contributed to a decrease in water consumption. He said people also have become more aware of the need to conserve.

"People want to be green," Maddaus said. "There's a lot of awareness about water use that didn't used to be there. In the '40s, '50s and '60s, we didn't worry about these things."

A rate study commissioned by Cleveland's Water Department noted that consumption has declined in suburbs despite the construction of larger homes with more bathrooms and bigger lawns.

Meanwhile, consumption for

the department's commercial customers has declined even more dramatically. The average commercial customer used about 4.5 million gallons a year in 1977 compared with about 1.3 million gallons annually in 2010.

The rate study does not draw any conclusions about the big drop in commercial use, which came as the number of commercial customers actually grew slightly.

"One hypothesis is that Cuyahoga County has lost a number of major employers — business establishments that once had thousands of employees each — while gaining some small personal-service and retail establishments that employ only a few people each," the study said.

Municipal & Financial Services Group, the Maryland-based firm that conducted the study, believes that declines in water use will continue. The firm estimated that water consumption throughout the Cleveland system will decrease 14 percent by 2015.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:
mgillispi@plaind.com, 216-999-4738